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Campaign Fundraising and Congressional Productivity: The Case for Shorter, Cheaper Elections

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Abstract

U.S. congressional campaigns are characterized by extensive fundraising demands and high costs, diverting significant time from legislative duties and amplifying external influences from wealthy donors. This article examines current practices, including time allocation (20-60% on fundraising), average costs (\$3.1 million for House incumbents), and major expenses (e.g., 52% on media). It argues that shorter, cheaper campaigns could enhance productivity by reducing multitasking inefficiencies and curb undue influence through lessened reliance on big donors. Reforms like public financing are proposed, supported by empirical evidence and international comparisons.

Introduction

In the United States, the electoral system places heavy emphasis on private fundraising, leading to concerns about its effects on governance. Members of Congress often spend substantial portions of their time soliciting donations, which competes with policy-making and constituent services. Campaign costs have escalated, with billions spent annually, primarily on advertising and outreach. This article synthesizes data from the 2024 election cycle to highlight these issues and explores how shorter and less expensive campaigns could improve productivity while mitigating external pressures from donors and political action committees (PACs).

Current Fundraising Practices in Congress

Congressional members allocate between 20% and 60% of their time to fundraising, with party leaders recommending 4-6 hours per day during election cycles. This varies by factors such as seniority and race competitiveness, but it consistently shifts focus from legislative work. The “permanent campaign” mindset is exacerbated by year-long cycles, contrasting with shorter periods in countries like the United Kingdom (6 weeks) or Canada (11 weeks).

Campaign Costs and Major Expenses

The financial burden is substantial. House incumbents raise an average of \$3.1 million (median \$2.1 million), while all House candidates spend between \$658,000 and \$1.17 million; Senate races often exceed \$10 million in competitive contexts. Aggregate federal spending in 2024 reached billions, with breakdowns showing media and advertising at 52% (\$7.7 billion), fundraising at 11% (\$1.7 billion), logistics at 10% (\$1.5 billion), administration at 8% (\$1.1 billion), and salaries at 7% (\$1 billion). These figures underscore a resource-intensive system dominated by money.

Impacts on Productivity

Extended fundraising diverts up to 30 hours weekly from core duties, contributing to multitasking inefficiencies that reduce effectiveness by up to 40%. Studies link concentrated donations to diminished legislative output, correlating with Congress’s declining productivity in bill passage and oversight. Shorter campaigns, as exemplified by Kamala Harris’s 2024 bid, would allow more focus on governance, potentially reversing these trends.

External Influences and Donor Sway

High costs foster dependence on affluent donors and super PACs, skewing policies toward elite interests, such as tax breaks and corporate bailouts, over public needs like climate initiatives. Party “dues” require members to raise \$100,000

to \$30 million annually, linking advancement to fundraising rather than merit. While some evidence post-Citizens United suggests increased spending may broaden economic participation, it risks entrenching corporate dominance.

Benefits of Shorter and Cheaper Campaigns

Implementing shorter cycles (e.g., months-long) and cost reductions via public financing, spending caps, or small-donor matching could enhance productivity by minimizing distractions and boost representation by leveling the playing field. Such reforms, including free broadcast time, would reduce donor influence and favoritism, with public support for limits reaching 77%. International models demonstrate that briefer, less costly elections maintain democratic integrity while improving efficiency.

Conclusion

The U.S. campaign finance system undermines congressional effectiveness through time-consuming fundraising and financial dependencies. Transitioning to shorter, cheaper models promises greater productivity and reduced external sway, fostering a more equitable democracy. Policymakers should prioritize reforms to align elections with public service over perpetual campaigning.

References

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